

Tarball Retrieval Device (TRD) assisting Gulf oil collection

In addressing the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, myriad functions are working together to contain and remove the oil being released in the Gulf of Mexico. The latest venture in this aspect is the Tarball Retrieval Device (TRD), which was developed by Capt. Gerry Matherne, and is now operating in Pensacola and Pensacola Pass, Fla. Assisted in the initial design by Maarten Zonjee, Matherne created this mechanical recovery system to enable BP's Vessels of Opportunity (VOO) program to more efficiently and effectively collect oil released by the off-shore drilling explosion.

Built with three-inch PVC piping and bags made of perforated webbing, the TRD can be towed by a variety of boats to collect the heavy oil and sheen. A filtration system, the TRD retains the oil while returning oil-free water to the Gulf.

After a collection of approximately one ton, the oil is transferred to a sister-ship which delivers the oil to collection sites for inspection and proper disposal by Waste Management and Environmental Resources Management. Sister-ships take delivery of the oil in rounds of two to three hours.

"We are able to process skimming on a continuous separation rather than stopping to go to discharge areas and returning to contaminated areas, which consumes valuable time," said Matherne. "By providing an all-in-one inclusive operation we enable a better all-around response to handling oil."

There are currently two TRDs being used by the Task Force 4 Nearshore Operations, which also uses other skimmers, a lift boat, spud and deck barges, on-water surveillance vessels, vessels of opportunity, and local area boat owners hired by BP. Four more units are now under final analysis, with numerous others being planned.

"In the first effort, these initial TRDs captured approximately four tons of oil," said Wayne Hebert, deputy director of Nearshore Operations for Alabama, Florida and Mississippi. "With four more heavy oil skimmers we will be able to raise that rate to at least eight tons, and possibly more."

Originally constructed by Jamerson Shipyard in Bayou La Batre, Ala., future heavy oil skimmers will be developed by contractors in one of the states affected by the oil spill: Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi.

TRD is a welcome addition to the numerous efforts currently being made in the Gulf Coast. Seemingly simple in some aspects, it is an ingenious response in helping combat the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.